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Human Rights in Russia and the Former Soviet Republics: Ethnic Conflict

Abstract

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has experienced high levels of ethnic conflict with regard to exit claims by former satellite states that no longer want to be part of the federation. Exit claims often antagonize the state. However, political leaders of titular ethnicities maximize ethnic revivals to keep traditions alive, and to minimize the amount of exclusion vis-à-vis the center. Massive human rights violations have resulted because of misperceptions between the center and the periphery, especially in Chechnya, the Volga-Ural's Region and Eastern Siberia.

Keywords

Human rights, Russia, Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Conflict, Ethnicity

Ethnic Conflict

By Kristina Libby

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has experienced high levels of ethnic conflict with regard to exit claims by former satellite states that no longer want to be part of the federation. Exit claims often antagonize the state. However, political leaders of titular ethnicities maximize ethnic revivals to keep traditions alive, and to minimize the amount of exclusion vis-à-vis the center. Massive human rights violations have resulted because of misperceptions between the center and the periphery, especially in Chechnya, the Volga-Ural's Region and Eastern Siberia.

Following the 1994 Chechen conflict, Chechen rebels have escalated their fight for independence. It has been argued that Russia's military tactics have violated the Geneva Conventions by performing extrajudicial executions, torture (including rape), "disappearances," and arbitrary detentions. The issue of collective memory must be understood when attempting to quell the conflict. When group collectives with shared histories are faced with direct violence, they will provide a strong and often insurmountable opposition; this creates a culture that is resistant to the "other" and to compromise. Regarding Chechnya in particular, government policies need to acknowledge the role of collective memory while considering group stabilization, the role of the deportations, the role of Shamil Basayev, and the role of the Russian military establishment.

The Volga-Urals region also experiences high levels of ethnic conflict, but there is less physical violence than in Chechnya due to their nationalizing policies and high levels of economic independence. Reshit Wegyizov, the Tatarstan ombudsman, stated that he receives about 1,000 appeals from people regarding human rights violations and between seven and 11 percent of them are resolved. Many of these stem from torture and police brutality against minorities. The quest for a "Great Tatarsan" could become the greatest source of ethnic instability in Russia, as it would infringe on ethnic claims in Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, Mari El and the Ulyanovsk oblast; these regions have a large number of Tatars but are currently outside of its federal borders. Concurrently, the presence of Islam affects ethnic claims—a genuine revival has been minimal but the political implications have been huge. Of larger concern is the Islamic revival in neighboring Dagestan. An increase in instability would be detrimental for Russia due to the province's economic importance.

Since 1989, Tuva, one of the four republics in Eastern Siberia, has been pursuing independence. Tuvians practice Buddhism and speak Turkish, a characteristic which makes them distinct. Rising crime and unemployment make this situation similar to that in the Northern Caucasus. Nevertheless, there is little information concerning the atrocities being committed. In part, this omission can be attributed to the relative size of Tuva.

Particularly since September 11, the U.S. and other nations in the world have become lax concerning Russia's approach to issues of ethnic conflict. The U.S. has allowed for levels of violence that previously would have been considered unacceptable as long as a tenuous claim that the violations related to Al-Qaeda existed. Frequently, this torture affected people with ethnic opinions dissimilar to those held by the Russian government rather than terrorists.

It is difficult to determine which catalysts for ethnic violence exist, and how they may be defined and differentiated. While a large amount of information exists concerning Chechnya, little information exists concerning human rights violations in other areas. If left unchecked, these

violations will become major spots of instability. The following bibliography breaks down ethnic conflict by area, beginning with a few sources on ethnic conflict more broadly.

Definitions

Ethnic Conflict

Hughes, James and Gwendolyn Sasse. 2001. "Comparing Regional and Ethnic Conflict in Post-Soviet Transition States." *Regional and Federal Studies* 11 (3): 1-35.

Annotation: This article discusses the nature of ethnic conflict as well as the literature that defines and differentiates types of ethnic conflict. The article explores various conflicts and the differences between regional and ethnic conflict.

Ethnicity

Gorenburg, Dmitry. 1999. "Regional Separatism in Russia: Mobilization or Power Grab?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51: 245-275.

Annotation: Gorenburg explores four Russian provinces and argues that the view of historians, who see ethnicity as a ploy for greater funding from the central government, is false. He argues that leaders of titular ethnic groups want to maximize ethnic revival while minimizing the exclusion of the Russian government. In doing so, he suggests that these findings could be applicable to other provinces, except the Northern Caucasus.

_____. 2001. "Nationalism for the Masses: Popular Support for Nationalism in Russia's Ethnic Republics." *Europe-Asia Studies* 53 (1): 73-104.

Annotation: Gorenburg provides statistical data for the theoretical framework developed earlier. However, the thesis of this article is that the strength of national identity and the extent to which it links nationalist movements is based on the ethnic institutions of the state. Comments are also made concerning those who are in favor of ethnic revival, i.e. those living in rural environments or those highly educated.

Kaufman, Eric. 2000. "Liberal Ethnicity: Beyond Liberal Nationalism and Minority Rights." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (6): 1008-1119.

Annotation: This article discusses ethnicity with the framework of liberalism. It argues that the work of liberal communitarians increases in difficulty as they move from national, to cultural, to ethnic groups. Therefore, ethnic groups with high levels of exclusivity increase the difficulty involved in creating a common good and overall sense of equality.

King, Charles. 2004. "The Micro-politics of Social Violence." *World Politics* 56: 431-455.

Annotation: The author examines the field of ethnic conflict literature and policy observations and then moves on to review and criticize two recent books. In doing so, he states that all past literature is "wholly phantom or ancillary to the core concerns of studying social violence". Thus, he argues that the literature that differentiates the study of nationalism from the study of ethnic conflict is about the questions asked and not about the conflicts explored. Its focus is more on the issue of ethnic conflict than it is on Russian states.

Williams, Bryan Gills. 2000. "Commemorating 'The Deportation' In Post-Soviet Chechnya: The Role of Memorialization and Collective Memory in the 1994-1996 and 1999-2000 Russo-Chechen Wars." *History & Memory* 12 (1): 101-134.

Annotation: Williams stresses the role of collective memory and group mentality in the creation and resistance of the Chechen nation-state. In the course of the paper, he argues that "the full integration of the Republic of Chechnya into the Russian Federation is impossible—it is hindered by historical memory, the experience of the past decade's two wars and the peculiarities of Chechen mentality, customs etc." (104). The argument rests on the idea that historical memory and group collectives, when faced with unrestrained directed violence, provide a strong counter force. In order to deal with the violence, governments need to address the group feelings of betrayal and repression before countermeasures can be made to perpetuate a lasting peaceful situation. In this case, both Russian and Chechen historical memories and collective attitudes need to be worked through.

_____. 2004. "From 'Secessionist Rebels' To 'Al-Qaeda Shock Brigades': Assessing Russia's Efforts to Extend the Post-September 11th War on Terror to Chechnya." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24(1): 197-209.

Annotation: Williams argues that the U.S. decision to side with Russia, in seeing Chechens as a nation of trans-national terrorists, is fundamentally flawed. The argument made is that the Chechens constitute a group of rebels fighting for freedom, and are separate and fundamentally different from the Muslim extremists the U.S. fears. However, an inability to acknowledge Chechen claims and the leaders of the moderate group could result in a severe dislike of the U.S. and eventually spawn anti-U.S. terror attacks. The author argues that the best move for the U.S. government would be to acknowledge the horrors perpetrated by the U.S. government and advocate a rebuilding of Chechnya as an autonomous nation.

Chechnya

2004. "Minorities at Risk. *Assessment for Chechens in Russia*" College Park: University of Maryland, 5 October. <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=36504>.

Annotation: The report assesses the current situation in Chechnya. It is a surface level historical account and provides a relatively unbiased and concise history of the conflict and current (2004) policy decisions being made with regards to the Chechen situation. The article also discusses statistics relating to the number of refugees fleeing Chechnya.

2004. "The War in Chechnya and Russian Civil Society." Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe:
http://www.csce.gov/index.cfm?Fuseaction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&ContentRecord_id=281&ContentType=B&CFID=26618717&CFTOKEN=95138370.

Annotation: This briefing to Congress is done by two Russians. They argue that much of what is known about Chechnya is simply propaganda. The article concludes with an interesting question and answer period in which the preferences of both sides are made clearer. Interestingly enough, there seems to be little debate about the fact that the Russian government was propagating much of the Chechen information. However, this may be simply out of sensitivity to the speakers.

2005. "Russia: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2005." U.S. Department of State, government report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61671.htm>.

Annotation: This report details human rights abuses; it makes special note of Chechnya and Ingushetia. In particular, it addresses torture and disappearance. The article deals with a wide range of issues, however, and therefore the topics mentioned are only discussed briefly. Yet specific examples of cases are given, which is necessary for understanding the nature of torture, free press, and disappearance in this area.

2006. "Russia Condemned For Disappearance of Chechen." Human Rights Watch.
<http://www.hrw.org/>.

Annotation: This press release details the disappearance of the Chechen, Khajimurat Yandiev.

2006. "Russia Condemned for Chechen Killings." Human Rights Watch. <http://www.hrw.org/>.

Annotation: This provides an example of Russian human rights abuses in Chechnya.

- Cassidy, Robert. 2003. "Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetrical Warfare." Department of Defence, U.S. Government: 1-81.
<http://www.defenselink.mil/>.

Annotation: The author discusses differences in military style between the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Russia invasion in Chechnya, with the aim of offering proposals for change

in the U.S. army. It documents the Soviet approach to fighting Chechens and solidifies the Russian military view as fighting Chechen terrorists.

Staub, Ervin. 1992. *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Group Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Annotation: Staub's book discusses the nature of genocide and the evil that begets its perpetration. While this does not relate directly to the topics, it provides an understanding of group mentality that can lead to genocide and group violence. His article is aimed at understanding the Holocaust, but the parallel associations to the Chechen genocide are enlightening.

Tishkov, Valery. 2004. *Chechnya: Life in a War Torn Society*. California: University of California Press.

Annotation: This book provides an extensive look at the history of Chechnya, the road to war, the actual war, and the direct aftermath of war. The author deals with the notion of the Chechen spirit and what it means to be Chechen. His argument is that the factual truth is not as important as the moral or interpretative truth. In understanding this, his book becomes a history of the varying sides of the war rather than a unilateral view of the conflict.

Valentino, Benjamin A. 2005. *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. London: Cornell University Press.

Annotation: Valentino discusses the nature of mass killing and the government policies that can and cannot stop this act from happening. The book argues against the position of Ervin Staub, claiming that a small group of leaders without much popular support can commit mass atrocities. His argument for preventing future atrocities is that societies must be disarmed and leaders removed from power.

Tatarstan

Davis, Howard, Phillip Hammond, and Lilia Nizamova. "Media, Language Policy and Cultural Change in Tatarstan: Historic vs. Pragmatic Claims to Nationhood," 6 (2): 203-226.

Annotation: Davis claims that the problem in Tatarstan involves differences in claims of ethnic nationalism. His extensive article provides an understanding of the changing nature of ethnic culture. He claims that history should not be the only factor in explaining ethnicity and that ethnicity changes rapidly. Therefore, an understanding of the current situation involves an understanding of politics, culture, media, and education as well as ethnicity. The article provides a distinct overview of Tatar identity.

Dunlop, John and Menon Rajan. "Chaos in the North Caucasus and Russia's Future." *Survival* 48 (2): 97-114.

Annotation: The authors argue that Chechen-style turmoil is spreading across the North Caucasus and that the Kremlin seems incapable of coping with the mounting chaos, or even understanding its causes. Islam has become an increasingly powerful political force seeking a sharia-based Caliphate uniting the North Caucasus. Russia has millions of Muslims, as well as xenophobic, anti-Muslim organizations, and such sentiments are increasingly prominent in the Russian political landscape. The spread of the North Caucasus crisis to other Muslim regions, such as Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, could affect Russia's entire political trajectory.

Khakimov, Raphael. 1998. "Tatarstan's Model for Developing Russian Federalism." *Center and Periphery in Russian Politics*, 235: 43-52.

Annotation: Khakimov discusses the Treaty between Russia and Tatarstan and how this treaty can be an effective model. He notes that it is unique to the situation and provides a buffer between each entity's separate constitutions. Because of the political situation in Russia, it would have been too difficult to create a new combined constitution. This article analytically addresses the situation using Tartastan as a model.

Yemelianova, Galina. 1999. "Islam and Nation Building in Tatarstan and Dagestan of the Russian Federation." *Nationalities Papers* 27 (4): 1-25.

Annotation: Yemelianova discusses, historically, the rise of Islam and its relationship to nation-building and ethnicities. She claims that ultimately Islam in Tatarstan is more of a political revival than a true religious revival. However, in Dagestan, it is an embraced religion. Her argument discusses primarily ethnic tension in Tatarstan.

Eastern Siberia

Gorenburg, Dmitry. 1999. "Regional Separatism in Russia: Mobilization or Power Grab?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51: 245-275.

Annotation: Gorenburg explores four provinces in Russia and explains how the view of historians, who see ethnicity as a ploy for greater funding from the central government, is false. Instead, he argues that leaders of titular ethnic groups want to maximize ethnic revival while minimizing the exclusion of the Russian governments. His study is mainly applicable to the Volga- Urals region. However, he suggests that these findings could be applicable to other provinces, except the North Caucas.

Khamidov, Alisher. 2002. "Brewing Ethnic Tension Causing Concern in South Kyrgyzstan." *TOL WIRE*, 19 November.

Annotation: Khamidov makes a short but comprehensive comparison of recent policies attempted by the community and government in dealing with ethnic conflict. He also provides statistics concerning ethnic Uzbeks' opinions about the current government.

Political and International Responses

2003. "Georgia: What Now?" International Crisis Group, 151.

Annotation: The report concludes that a stable Georgia is in the interest of all parties: Russia, Georgia, U.S., and the E.U.. The best path forward, the report believes, is for a popularly supported and strong government that is respected internationally, who can deal with social and economic progress. These conclusions are based on a historical overview done by the committee. The report also offers recommendations for future political and international success. It does offer suggestions that need to be incorporated at the present, specifically a strong and publicly supported government who can move Georgia forward with Georgian issues at heart but also with a strong sense of the international community and its reception of those policies.

2003. "Rough Justice: The Law and Human Rights in the Russian Federation." Amnesty International. <http://www.amnesty.org/russia>.

Annotation: The report offers policy suggestions based on increased legal and governmental regulations as a means of countering human rights abuses. It also covers government, anti-terrorism projects, and the prison system.

2006. "Ethnic Minorities under Attack." Amnesty International. <http://www.amnesty.org/russia/minorities.html>.

Annotation: The web page states that Russia has not been hard enough on those who perpetrate crimes of ethnic violence. Furthermore, it discusses the state's institutional violence towards visible minorities.

Codagnone, Cristiano and Vassily Filippov. 2000. "Equity, Exit and National Identity in a Multinational Federation: The 'Multicultural Constitutional Patriotism' Project in Russia." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 26 (2).

Annotation: Cristiano Codagnone and Vassily Filippov discuss the new measures taken by the Russian government in creating a federation of "autonomous nation-states." The two authors bring to light a variety of differing opinions about the issue from the periphery, the center,

Russian, and ethnic nationals. The authors comment on the asymmetric nature of Russia's current policy and the limits of government power as an infringement upon central and effective governing of the new federation.

Kortunov, S. 1998. "Russia's Way: National Identity and Foreign Policy." *International Affairs: A Russian Journal* 4 (44).

Annotation: Kortunov presents a Russian view concerning exit claims and independence. His main argument centers on the idea that the West, especially America, is acting to destroy the Russian empire. Russia, he argues, has the right to build a democratic and economically tied union of states which could become a federation similar to the USA. However, he notes that this is not imperialism but rather a rebuilding of ethnic Russian nationalism. Ironically, the attempts to do this often result in a lack of minority nationalism.

Mendelson, Sarah. 2002. "Russian Rights Imperilled: Has Anybody Noticed." *International Security* 26 (4): 39-69.

Annotation: Mendelson examines the international community's engagement with Russian violations of human rights in Chechnya. This article posits that the international system has a high threshold for rights abuses post September 11. In fact, she argues that international human rights laws are being ignored in order to fight terrorism; the process of "global democratization" is increasing the occurrence of human rights violations because of internal and external barriers associated with the process that prevent adherence to the norms.

Pearson, Frederic S. 2001. "Dimensions of Conflict Resolution in Ethnopolitical Disputes." *Journal of Peace Research* 38 (3): 275-287.

Annotation: This article points out that elite initiatives are not always the best ways of resolving conflict in nations. Instead, grass roots attempts must also be employed in order to stimulate collective action by the people. Being the foremost paper from a series of conference papers, the article also breaks down many ideas about conflict and resolution.

Rywkin, Michael. 2006. "The Phenomenon of Quasi-States." *Diogenes* 53 (2): 23-28.

Annotation: Rywkin notes that the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the independence of a number of republics, which gave rise to the appearance of what the author calls "quasi-states." A quasi-state does not enjoy full international recognition, but functions nonetheless as a genuine state entity with its administration, army and financial system—all controlled by the protector. Its existence continually threatens the peace and security of the region in which it is situated, keeping it in a state of permanent tension. This article provides a base for understanding the political situation.